

Handoff

By Timothy Zahn; Illustrated by Dave Dorman

In ones and twos, with a gentle clatter and a dignified bustle, the musicians started to drift onstage. They moved to their assigned seats or stands, gathered their instruments, and began the muted cacophony of their individual warm-up procedures. The audience, which had been abuzz with the usual pre-concert conversation, quieted itself in inverse proportion to the increasing noise from the stage, an air of anticipation rising from the assemblage and spreading over it like an invisible fog.

As well it should. Here, on this benighted Mid-Rim world of Chibias, the Coruscant Full Symphony was about to perform.

Seated in the twelfth-to-the-last row, two seats in from the left-most aisle, Mara Jade took a deep breath and tried to savor the moment. She had always loved the orchestra and in days gone by had made it a point to attend a concert whenever time and her duties permitted.

Occasionally, she'd gone so far as to manufacture a reason to attend, picking at random some high official with a permanent box and suggesting he be kept under observation for the evening. Her master usually indulged her wishes, though she doubted he'd ever been fooled by her excuses. Indeed, nothing had ever seemed to fool him.

Nothing, that is, except the manner and time of his own death. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, the memories of that moment darkening the corners of her mind even through the subtle and whimsical musical preparations going on before her on the distant stage. She'd come here tonight hoping to bring back the soothing memories of better times. Instead, all she was getting was a new emphasis of the gaping hole where her life had once been. It was Skywalker's fault, his and Vader's.

And, of course, hers, for not killing Skywalker when she'd had the chance.

The entire orchestra was onstage now, the warm-up in full voice, but the magic was gone. With an angry sadness, Mara knew she'd lingered on this world one evening too long. It was time to move on.

Murmuring apologies to the two Duros seated beside her, she sidled her way past them. No, with Ysanne Isard and all of Imperial Intelligence hunting for her, she had definitely overstayed her welcome.

She would return to her modest hotel room, pack her small collection of belongings, and get herself off this rock. There would be freighters coming and going from the city's spaceport all night, and the guild hiring center that handled pick-up crews was open around the clock. It should be easy enough to talk herself into a temporary job.

Reaching the aisle, she started walking up the gentle slope toward the exit. Ahead, just inside the door, three men were having a quiet but intense conversation with a thin, scraggly haired youth. One of the men was middle-aged, his short dark hair salted with bits of white, his outfit the kind of formal evening wear one would expect of a properly cultured concertgoer. The other two wore identical tunics and the gold nameplates of concert-hall personnel, as well as the weighty look of security types.

Mara eyed the kid, mentally shaking her head at his simple traveling outfit. Back on Coruscant, he wouldn't even have been let into an evening performance looking that shabby. He was even lugging a backpack, of all things.

Then, even as a fresh set of bittersweet memories drifted in front of her eyes, she saw the man in the formalwear slip something the size and shape of a datacard into the side pocket of the kid's backpack.

Mara slowed her pace, trained investigative reflexes kicking into gear. The man wasn't simply replacing something he'd taken out earlier; the movement had been surreptitious and designed to be out of the view of the two security men. It wasn't some kind of courier handoff, not with those two security men standing over the boy, and with the boy as the center of attention, it seemed unlikely the man was getting rid of something incriminating before he himself could be searched.

That left only one possibility. Whatever he'd put into the backpack was designed to get the kid in trouble.

One of the security men had taken charge of the backpack now, his partner gently but insistently nudging the kid through the door back into the lobby. Mara picked up her pace again as they disappeared, wondering what exactly she was going to do.

Wondering, for that matter, what she even should do. This was none of her business; and as an ex-Emperor's Hand with no legal authority, she was hardly in a position to make it her business -- especially with Isard on her tail.

But the kid had looked so confused and lost, as she herself had been feeling lately.

Just inside the door, across the aisle from where the quiet altercation had taken place, an usher stood at her post. She was fingering her collection of program datacards, her head turned half around as she craned her neck toward the lobby and the recently departed group.

Which left her completely unprepared as Mara slammed full-tilt into her.

"Oh! Excuse me," Mara gasped, grabbing the woman for their mutual balance as the impact threatened to dump both of them onto the thickly carpeted floor. "How very clumsy of me. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," the woman assured her, fumbling to keep a grip on her datacards. "You?"

"I'm fine," Mara said, smoothing out the woman's jacket where she'd grabbed her. "I am just so blind in the dark."

"That's all right," the usher said. "You'd better hurry, or you'll miss the overture."

"Right," Mara said, brushing past her and hurrying through the door.

There she paused long enough to pin the usher's appropriated nameplate onto her own gown before continuing on to the lobby.

The foursome was still there, gathered off to one side out of the path of the last few stragglers hurrying to get into the concert. The security man was still holding the kid's backpack, but he was making no effort to search it. The man in the formalwear, for his part, was standing a respectful pace back from the rest of them.

Mara studied the latter as she walked toward the group. He was younger than she'd first thought, she saw now, probably no more than thirty years old. His face and posture seemed calm and poised, but she could sense a tension lurking just beneath the surface. Something was going on, all right, something important.

"... until the proper authorities arrive," the intense man was saying as Mara strode within earshot. His eyes flicked to the intruder, taking in Mara's face, outfit, and nameplate in that single glance, then flicking just as casually away.

The two security men, in contrast, hadn't even noticed her. 'Absolutely, Counselor,' one of them replied, his gaze locked on the kid. 'Imperial law is clear on the procedure for someone caught with illegal weapons.'

Mara grimaced to herself. So that was the game. Plant something incriminating on the kid, then accuse him of a weapons violation, which would allow an immediate search. The police would find the plant, and the kid would find himself up to his chin in trouble.

But why? In the better lighting out here, she could see that the kid looked dirty, had a sprinkling of chin stubble, and apparently had been sleeping in the clothes he had on. What in the Empire could possibly make him worth such a frame-up?

There was only one way to find out. "May I help you?" she asked, putting official firmness into her voice.

The intense man turned to look, his eyes glancing again at her nameplate. "Who are you?"

"I'm Litassa Colay," Mara told him, adding an imaginary surname to the one etched into her borrowed nameplate. "Director of Offworld Special Events for the concert hall. Is there a problem..." she dipped her eyes to the nameplate of the man holding the backpack "Jayx?"

"We're not sure," Jayx said, his face a little uncertain as he looked her over. But she had a proper nameplate, and of course he couldn't be expected to recognize everyone in the concert hall's upper management. "This gentleman is Counselor Raines of Governor Egron's staff. He says he saw the boy here fiddling with a blaster inside his backpack. He's called the authorities, and we're waiting for them to show up and do a proper search.

"We're making sure we follow the law," the second security man, Tomin, added.

"Very commendable," Mara said, throwing a quick glance behind the group. There were three hinged, swing-out doors set into the lobby's side wall: unmarked, but probably offices or small storage rooms. Mara reached out to the Force, hoping to get some idea of what lay beyond each of the doors.

But there was nothing. No extra knowledge or insight; no touch of another mind; no sensation whatsoever.

The Force, apparently, was no longer with her. Meanwhile, she was facing off against two presumably trained security guards, each of whom outweighed her by at least ten kilos, with an assumed identity either of them might see through any second now, in the middle of a city and a planet and an Empire where she was a wanted woman.

Her sleeve gun and lightsaber were back in her hotel room. What in the Empire was she doing here?

For whatever crazy reason, she'd dealt herself into this mess. There was no way out but to see it through, preferably someplace a little less public.

"But not in the middle of the lobby," she continued. Picking the leftmost door at random, she gestured toward it. "This way, please."

Tomin took the boy's arm, and the group headed that direction. Mara stayed behind them, counting out the timing. As Jayx got within three paces, she moved to just behind him and got a grip on the backpack straps.

"Open the door," she ordered him.

Obediently, reflexively, he let her take the pack and stepped forward, pulling out his keycard and slipping it into the slot. The door beeped, and he pulled it open.

To reveal, not an office or storage room, but a long corridor with several other doors leading off it. At the far end, it bent to the left, probably headed backstage.

Not exactly what she'd been expecting, but it should do. "Go ahead," she said, waving Tomin forward with her free hand. "We'll wait for them in the first rehearsal room."

Tomin's forehead creased a little at that, but he turned and started down the corridor without comment. Mara motioned Counselor Raines to follow. Again, his eyes flicked to her face as if sensing the trap, but the momentum of the situation was against him, and he too headed in without argument. Mara stepped in front of Jayx and the boy, as if she were going to join the procession

And grabbing the edge of the door, she slammed it shut behind them.

Jayx was still standing there, looking stunned, as she whirled around and thrust the kid's backpack into his face. Automatically, his hands leaped up to protect his head; and with her free hand, Mara jabbed him hard under the rib cage.

He doubled over with a pained gasp. Mara considered chopping him on the side of the neck to make sure he stayed down, decided it wasn't necessary, and instead swung him around and shoved him hard against the door.

Just in time. The door was starting to open again as either Raines or Tomin tried to charge back out at her. Jayx's impact slammed it shut again, probably braining whoever it was in the process.

The kid was gaping at her. "Come on," Mara ordered, grabbing his wrist and heading for the exit doors.

For the first half-second it was like tugging on a statue. Then, abruptly, he came unstuck from the inlaid marble floor and let her drag him along. "But I haven't done anything," he protested.

"I'd love to see you convince them of that," Mara said back over her shoulder, glancing through the elaborately etched glass doors at the front of the concert hall. No signs of any police yet. Pushing open the door, she pulled the kid out into the night air. "Your friend Counselor Raines planted something in your pack."

She kept them at a fast jog for the first half block, then slowed to a walk to better blend in with the rest of the evening pedestrian traffic. There were no shouts or other signs of pursuit from behind them, and for the rest of that first block Mara began to wonder whether Raines had called the police at all.

And then, just as they reached the corner, a small urban personnel carrier came roaring down the street, heading for the concert hall. Only it wasn't carrying police. As it passed under a streetlight, she caught the white glint of stormtrooper armor.

The boy cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you have anything to eat," he said hopefully. Apparently, he hadn't noticed the stormtroopers.

"Sure," Mara said with a sigh, turning down the side street and heading for her hotel.

What in the Empire had she gotten herself into?

* * *

With stormtroopers probably fanning out across the theater district, it didn't seem like a good idea to hit a cantina or tapcaf, and all she had back in her room were a couple of pieces of slightly stale fruit and a pack of emergency ship rations.

But the kid wasn't picky. He dug into the meager fare as if he hadn't seen food in a week. Studying his hollow cheeks as he ate, Mara decided that he quite possibly hadn't.

Both pieces of fruit and three ration bars later, he finally shambled to a stop. "Thanks," he said, draining his fifth glass of water. "Sorry. I guess I was hungrier than I thought."

"That's all right," Mara assured him. "So. What was that all about back at the concert hall?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. All I know is that I was supposed to meet someone, and that he never showed up, and I can't get home--"

"Whoa," Mara said, holding up a hand. "Let's take it from the beginning. Where are you from?"

"Saraban City," he told her. "It's on Sibisime. I was, well, sort of working there when a man came to see me. He said that if I came here to Chibias that he had a really good job for me in the governor's palace. This is where the governor lives, isn't it?"

"He's right over there, under all those domes and towers," Mara said dryly, nodding toward the window and the view of the governor's palace a dozen blocks away.

The kid squinted. "Oh. Yeah. Anyway, I got here a week ago. He'd given me a spaceliner ticket, but he wasn't at the spaceport to meet me. The address he told me to meet him at wasn't a real place -- that's why I thought this might not be the right city. I only had a one-way ticket, and I didn't have enough money to go home, and all of it ran out a couple of days ago anyway."

"Where have you been staying?" Mara asked.

"Out there," he said, waving vaguely at the window.

"I suppose not," Mara agreed. "What made you come to the concert? And how did you get in without any money?"

"Oh, I already had a ticket," the boy said. "It was in the packet he gave me with my liner ticket. I thought maybe he was planning to show up there." He shrugged. "If not, at least I could get a couple hours of sleep."

He ran a hand through his slightly greasy hair. "I guess I'll never know now."

"Oh, I think he was there," Mara assured him, picking up the boy's backpack. "At least in spirit. You were set up."

"Set up?" he echoed, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I mean someone lured you here, let you get all confused and hungry, and then set you up for a serious problem." She held up the datacard Counselor Raines had slipped into the backpack. "With this."

The boy frowned a little harder. Or maybe he was just trying to read the label. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Mara said, studying the markings. "But it's got Governor Egron's official crest on it, plus what looks like a Level Two Secret classification."

His eyes bulged. "The governor's crest?"

"That's right." Mara tossed him the datacard and stood up. "They were setting you up to get caught with stolen government secrets."

She crossed to the room's computer and turned it on. "But that's crazy," the kid protested from behind her. "What in the -- I mean, why? Why me?"

"In cases like this, the answer's always the same," Mara said, calling up a Holonet link. This still didn't make any sense, but at least she now had a place to start looking for their mysterious would-be blackmailer. "Specifically, you have something they want."

"That's even crazier," he insisted. "I haven't got anything. No family, no money. No friends."

Mara felt her lip twitch. Just like her. "What about skills or training?" she suggested. The Holonet came up, and she keyed in one of her special access codes.

"Anything that might be useful to someone? Blast."

"What is it?" he asked, levering himself out of his chair and coming over to stand behind her.

"I was hoping to tap into the palace computer and try to locate this Counselor Raines," she told him, trying another code. This one didn't work, either. "I know some high-level passcodes, but it looks like the governor's people have gotten in and changed them."

"Oh," the boy said. "Can I try?"

Mara frowned up at him. But the boy seemed perfectly serious. "What, you know some Imperial access codes?" she asked sarcastically.

"Well, no," he conceded. "But I'm pretty good with computers."

Mara hesitated. A waste of time; but on the other hand, she didn't have any better ideas at the moment. She'd already locked out any backtrack probes they might try, so it couldn't hurt to let him play with it if he wanted to. "Okay, sure," she said, standing up and giving him the chair. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten since lunch, and she stepped over to the open package of ration bars the kid had ravaged. Maybe some food would help her think. She chose one of the bars and peeled back the wrapper.

"Okay," the kid called.

"Okay what?" Mara asked, taking a bite.

"I'm in," he said. "What are we looking for again?"

Mara went back to him, a cold chill running up her back. A Level Three Governor/Diplomatic Imperial encryption; and this street kid had sliced it like it wasn't even there? "We're looking for the man at the concert hall," she said between stiff lips. "I doubt Raines is his real name, so you'll probably need to pull up a list of personnel images."

"Oh, right," the boy said, his fingers pounding delicately at the keys. The first group of personnel files came up, and he leaned forward to study the computer display. "Let's see ..."

"He's not there," Mara said. "Move on."

The kid looked up at her. "But I haven't had a chance to look at them."

"I have," Mara told him, snagging a second chair and pulling it over beside him. "He's not there."

"But--"

"Hey, trust me," Mara interrupted gently, forcing a smile. This kid was still an enigma, but at least she now knew why he was worth conning halfway across the sector. "You're good at computers. This part I'm good at."

"Oh. Okay." He still looked puzzled, but he nevertheless turned back to the computer and pulled up the next set of files.

It was a good-sized palace, and Governor Egron seemed to have more than his fair share of employees, servants, advisors, and other random people feeding at the governmental trough. Even with Mara's trained eye and disciplined mind it took them over two hours to go through the files.

In the end, they came up with nothing.

"I guess he's not connected with the governor, after all," the boy said, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his fingers.

"Oh, he's connected, all right," Mara said. "Otherwise, where did he get that datacard? He's just not officially connected."

The boy seemed to digest that. "So what do we do?"

"What you do is stay here," Mara said, getting up and going over to the bed. Getting her travel bag out from beneath it, she pulled out her sleeve gun holster and strapped it onto her left forearm. Retrieving the blaster itself from beneath her pillow, she holstered it. Then, crossing to the small closet by the door, she pulled out a demure but expensive-looking jacket.

The boy hadn't missed a move. "Are you the police?" he asked, sounding more in awe than worried. "Or a Detector?"

"Neither," Mara said, feeling another twinge of loss for the life she'd once had. "I'll be back soon," she told him, putting the jacket on and making sure the left sleeve was clear for a quick draw. "Don't call anyone, don't answer your comlink, and don't open the door. Just pretend you're not here. Shower or sleep if you want. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Where are you going?"

"Someone in the palace is involved," Mara told him. "That same someone was expecting Raines to bring you in from the concert hall. He's likely to be worried right now, wondering where you are and what went wrong with the plan."

She smiled tightly. "When a tree's already shaking, it's much easier to knock the fruit out of it."

"Oh," he said. "Yeah."

"Right," Mara said. "So you just stay put."

She paused at the door as a thought suddenly struck her. "By the way, I never did get your name."

He shrugged. "They call me Ghent."

"Ghent what?"

He seemed confused. "Just Ghent. I mean, I used to have -- but nobody really uses it anymore, and--"

"All right, fine," she interrupted. "I'll see you later."

She went out, making sure the door sealed behind her. If Ghent was that impressed with a simple sleeve blaster, she thought wryly, it was just as well he hadn't seen what was nestled in its long pouch under her left arm.

Reaching into the pouch, making sure her lightsaber was riding loose and ready, she headed into the night.

* * *

"The name is Arica Pradeux," Mara said briskly for the third time that evening, this time to the guard captain waiting just inside the palace entrance foyer. "The recognition code is Hapsir Barrini. Inform Governor Egron that I want to see him immediately."

The captain's mouth twitched. "Return to your duties," he ordered the stormtroopers who had escorted Mara in from the palace gate. "You: come with me."

He led the way across the foyer and through a tall set of double doors that slid open at a muttered word. Beyond them was a private reception room, smaller than the foyer but more elaborately decorated. It was dome-shaped, two stories high, with curved support columns and a railed balcony that ran around the room at the second-floor level.

"So you're here on behalf of a Grand Moff, are you?" the caption commented as the doors slid shut behind them.

A test? Obviously. "Your data pad must have a short init," Mara said. "The recognition code I gave you is that of an envoy from a Grand Admiral."

The captain studied her face. "Not entirely," he said. "I understand there's another word to the code."

"You understand correctly," Mara acknowledged. "I'll give that word to the Governor. No one else." The captain nodded slowly. "Of course," he said. "Wait here."

He strode across the room and exited through one of the doors there. Mara glanced around, taking in the details of the room.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," a familiar voice called from overhead.

Mara looked up. The man who called himself Counselor Raines was standing directly above her, leaning on the railing as he gazed down.

"Perhaps you can," Mara agreed. "Shall we talk?"

He smiled slightly as he straightened up and started walking around the circle. A few steps ahead of him, a spiral staircase began to descend, corkscrewing its way down to Mara's level. Mara watched as he descended the staircase, looking for clues to his identity or position in his step and posture. Not military, she decided, or at least not of high rank. But not a career politician, either. Special forces? Possibly.

He reached the lower floor and walked toward her. "My name's Counselor Raines," he said. "I don't think we were properly introduced back at the concert hall."

"No, we weren't," Mara agreed. He had, she noted, a fresh bruise on his forehead. Apparently he'd been the one who'd been charging back at her when she slammed Jayx into the concert hall door. "For that matter, we haven't been now, either," she added. "There isn't any such person as Counselor Raines."

His lip tightened into an ironic smile. "So you've been into the governor's files already, have you?" He shrugged, conceding the point. "Very well. Call me Markko. I'm sort of unofficially attached to Governor Egron."

"How unofficially?" Mara asked.

Markko smiled again, with a shade more irony this time. "Elsewhere in the Empire, I'd probably be called a friend," he said. "But as you know, high-ranking officials aren't allowed to have friends."

Mara worked hard to keep her face expressionless. But something must have leaked through anyway, because she caught his twitch of response. "Speaking of friends," he added smoothly, "how is yours?"

"Safely tucked away," Mara said, annoyed at having lost a point already in this little match. "He's rather confused, though. Why don't you fill me in?"

"Are you really from a Grand Admiral?" Markko asked bluntly.

"I've acted as courier for them on occasion," Mara told him, which happened to be true. "At the moment, I'm between jobs."

"Then this isn't an official inquiry?"

"Let's say the situation has piqued my interest," Mara said. "What has Ghent done that you feel it worthwhile to spin him in circles this way?"

Markko shrugged. "The governor has a job that requires his assistance. I volunteered to obtain it."

"By blackmailing him with a stolen datacard? Why didn't you just hire him?"

Markko snorted. "What, a rotten little fringe slicer?"

"A rotten little fringe slicer whose help you need," Mara countered. "So. What am I bid?"

Markko seemed taken aback. "What?"

"You heard me," Mara said. "You need Ghent. I've got him. How clear do I have to make it?"

"You're going to sell him out?" Markko asked suspiciously. "I thought you were his friend."

"You're the one who said he was my friend, not me," Mara pointed out. "But that's not what I meant. I'm offering his services for hire." She lifted her eyebrows slightly. "And after what you've put him through, don't expect him to come cheap."

Markko's face had taken on a knowing look. "Uh-huh," he said. "And as his broker, I gather you'll be taking the usual ten percent?"

"Twenty," Mara corrected. "Because I'm also his guarantor."

"Guarantor of what?"

"His safety," Mara said softly. "If he's as good a slicer as you imply, the Empire might find other uses for him. I wouldn't want him to trip over anything, say, on the way out the palace door."

Markko smiled. "Of course," he said. "All right, I'll play. How much do you want?"

Mara made a quick mental calculation. A top computer expert could command five or six hundred an hour from a legitimate company. Time to see just how badly Markko wanted Ghent's help. "Two thousand," she said.

Markko's eyes went wide. "*Two thousand?*"

"Yes," Mara said. "Per hour, of course."

Markko shook his head. "You're insane."

"And you're desperate," she reminded him. "Because Governor Egron didn't ask you to hire Ghent at all, did he? No Imperial governor would suggest hiring a fringe slicer to do a job for him."

She leveled a finger toward him. "No, Markko. You're the one Egron hired to do the job. Only you're not a good enough slicer to handle it, are you?"

This time it was his microscopic reaction that indicated the mark had been hit dead-center. And as she had earlier, he also recognized that a point had been lost. "Very clever," he said sourly. "Which Grand Admiral did you say you're working for?"

"I said I was between jobs," Mara told him. "What do you need Ghent to do?"

The muscles in Markko's cheeks tensed slightly. "We have a Rebel computer system," he said, very softly. "Not just a line computer, but one captured from a sector command center. If we can slice it, we can clear the vermin out this entire region of space."

Mara took a deep breath, her hand wanting to reach to her lightsaber. A chance to hit back at Skywalker's Rebel friends. 'And you can't handle it?'

Markko grimaced. "I'm a pretty fair slicer," he said. "But this is definitely out of my league."

"How very inconvenient for you," Mara murmured. Skywalker's face was hovering in front of her eyes ...

"I'll give you eight hundred for him," Markko suggested.

With an effort, Mara shook Skywalker out of her thoughts. "The deal is two thousand."

"This is ridiculous," Markko exploded. "A thousand, then. That's twice what he could make in any legitimate corporation."

"Legitimate corporations don't make you sleep in the street for two days and then try to blackmail you," Mara said. "Two thousand. Take it or leave it."

Markko took a ragged breath. "I'll take it," he said between clenched teeth. "When?"

"Oh, I don't know." Mara glanced over at an ornate chrono set into the wall. "The night's still young. We'll be here in two hours."

"Tonight?" Markko seemed startled.

"Why not?" Mara asked. "You want it sliced, let's get it sliced. What entrance should we use?"

Markko pursed his lips. "Southwest gate," he said. "I'll be waiting to let you in."

"We'll be there," Mara promised. "Just make sure you have the money ready."

The city was still buzzing with vehicles and pedestrians as she was escorted to the outer palace gate. She considered hailing a transport, decided against it, and headed off instead on foot. Ghent, she suspected, would be excited about the deal she'd just struck. Assuming, of course, that she decided to tell him about it. Because there was something about Markko's story that bothered her. Something that didn't quite hang together.

Why would Markko feel he had to blackmail or -- now -- hire Ghent to do this job for him? For that matter, why would Governor Egron have hired Markko in the first place? The Empire had any number of competent computer experts; maybe not as good or as fast as Ghent, but competent nevertheless. Why weren't any of them on the job?

Maybe they already were, and had merely gotten stalled. But then why let Ghent dangle for a week? Why not immediately haul him to the palace and order him to do the job? Governor Egron was the Empire, after all, at least in this sector. He could commandeer anyone or anything he wanted.

No, there was something else going on here. Something worth a great deal of subterfuge, and a great deal of money.

And, apparently, something worth following her for.

She'd spotted him within the first block: a smallish, nondescript man, doddling along behind her as if he was just in from the farmlands to sample the sights and sounds of the big city. Not bad, but not nearly good enough for someone with her training. Obviously, Markko didn't trust her to show up as promised.

Obviously, too, he had underestimated her.

This had possibilities.

She kept up her pace, heading straight in the direction she'd started out on, keeping an eye on the man following in her wake. Up ahead, around the next corner, were the entrances to two of the city's smaller theaters.

At least one of which should be letting out just about now. She rounded the corner, putting her temporarily out of sight of her tail. Parked along both sides of the walkway, as she'd expected, were rows of landspeeders; and streaming out the theater doors on the far side of the street were the evening's crowd of humans and aliens.

Perfect.

Glancing back once to make sure the corner building was still blocking the tail's view of her, she dropped flat on the sidewalk and rolled beneath one of the parked vehicles. In some ways it was an obvious maneuver, but the Emperor's trainers had assured her that most people, even professionals, simply didn't think of it.

Especially when other possibilities were so much more likely. All along the street now, vehicles were starting up and pulling out of their parking spaces as the exiting theatergoers headed for home. She kept her attention on the corner, and a few seconds later a pair of low-cut boots appeared. The man paused, then hurried forward.

But his mission was doomed, and he knew it. Too many vehicles, too many people, and too little light. He went a couple of landspeeders past Mara's hiding place and then gave up, slowing to a reluctant halt. Snarling out a curse that was audible even over the noise of departing vehicles, he turned back.

He was just passing Mara's landspeeder again when another set of boots joined him from around the corner. "What are you doing?" a man's voice hissed, barely audible over the rumbling of the crowd. "Where is she?"

Interesting, Mara thought, edging as close to the edge of the vehicle as she dared. So there had been a second tail, someone ready to take over the chase when Mara succeeded in dumping the first, more obvious one. Maybe Markko hadn't underestimated her as much as she'd thought.

"Where do you think she is?" the first tail retorted. "Somewhere here, or somewhere gone."

The newcomer cursed, less imaginatively than his partner. "Better report it. Markko's not going to be happy."

"Markko's not going to be happy," the first tail mimicked savagely. "No kidding."

The report was short and sharp. Mara couldn't make out the words coming over the comlink, but from her side of the conversation it was clear that Markko wasn't happy at all. The two men turned and stomped off back around the corner in the direction from which they'd come.

Mara gave them to the count of thirty to get some distance.

Then, rolling back from beneath the speeder, she brushed the worst of the dirt off her gown and headed off in pursuit.

They had followed her. It was only right that she return the favor. And, perhaps, show them how this tailing business was supposed to be done.

* * *

She had expected the two men to return to the palace, where about all she would be able to see would be whether it was Markko or someone else who met them at the door. To her surprise, they instead turned down a side street two blocks short of the palace. A minute later, they disappeared through the front door of a large private home midway down the block.

Mara continued on to the back of house, keeping to the opposite side of the street and trying to sort out this unexpected development as she worked her way to the back. Why would Markko send them somewhere outside the palace? Were they simply going home? But why would he let them do that without first getting a full report?

Or was this Markko's home? But again, why not debrief them at the palace?

The back door was locked, but not seriously enough to be a problem. The rear of the house was dark and silent, but as she moved along a shadowy hallway she could see diffuse light and hear soft voices coming from somewhere ahead of her. The light and sound began to sharpen as she passed through an informal dining room, a game room, and a meditation chamber that seemed laid out more for entertainment than actual solitude.

And then, turning one final corner, she was there.

The room was about five meters along the hallway, its open door spilling out both light and tense-sounding conversation. Two of the voices she recognized: her two erstwhile tails. There were at least three other voices, though Markko's didn't seem to be one of them. She strained her ears, trying to pick out the words.

"Just keep your hands where I can see them," Markko said conversationally from behind her.

Mara bit down hard on a curse. Concentrating so hard on the conversation, she had completely forgotten to keep an eye on her own back.

But then, in days gone by, she hadn't needed to. The Force had always given her subtle nudges and warnings of things her eyes and ears hadn't yet picked up, giving her that extra edge of alertness and that extra layer of defense.

But the Force, it seemed, was no longer with her.

Why wasn't it? Had she forgotten how to reach it, here in the wake of the Emperor's sudden death? Or had the trauma of that event shut her mind away from the Force, blocking her normal path to it?

Or had the Force never truly been with her at all? Had it always been simply the Emperor, acting through her, who had had that ability?

But that was a topic for another day's consideration. Right now, she had more immediate problems on her hands.

"There you are," she said calmly, turning around, making sure to keep her hands away from her body. Markko was standing in an open closet door about three meters back from her, a small blaster in his hand. "You know, it would have been a lot simpler if you'd just invited me to this party in the first place."

"Funny," Markko grunted, gesturing with his blaster. "Inside. Don't try anything."

"Me?" Mara countered, turning and heading for the lighted room. "You're the one playing games. I thought we had a deal."

Somewhere in the past few seconds, the conversation from the room had ceased. Mara stepped through the door, to find a ring of eight people seated stiffly in chairs or on couches, all of them now turned to face her. Three of the men had their hands inside their coats, obviously clutching concealed blasters. "Hello," Mara greeted them. "Welcome to Markko's weekly game of Follow The Leader."

The first tail snorted. "Funny," he grunted.

"My name is Arica," Mara continued. "I'm the leader."

She looked at Markko as he stepped into the room behind her. "How about some fresh introductions, Markko? Starting with you."

"You're the leader," Markko reminded her dryly. "Why don't you start?" He hefted the blaster pointedly. "And before you answer, I should tell you that I checked the palace computer files after you left. There's no listing for any Arica Pradeux."

"Pradeux," one of the other men muttered. "There was an Alec Pradeux among Palpatine's advisors."

"No relation," Mara assured him. "I just borrow his name some-times. It's useful in opening doors."

"So who are you?" Markko asked. "And whose side of the war are you on?"

Mara shrugged, trying hard to read the atmosphere in the room as she mentally flipped a coin. A meeting outside the palace certainly implied an anti-Imperial gathering. On the other hand, if Egron had enemies inside the palace -- and what governor didn't? -- this might just as easily be a pro-Imperial group he'd sanctioned.

Her flipped coin landed on its edge. "At the moment, neither," she told Markko. "I'm strictly an independent contractor."

"You working with Talon Karrde?" someone asked suspiciously. Mara shook her head. "Never heard of him. Who is he?"

"A would-be smuggling chieftain," another man said with a snort. "One of a hundred scrambling to take advantage of the hole Jabba left when he got his fat throat squeezed."

Mara felt her throat tighten. Jabba the Hutt. Killed on Tatooine by -- who else? -- Luke Skywalker. No matter what she did, she couldn't ever seem to get away from him. "What does Karrde have to do with this?"

"Absolutely nothing," Markko said. "So you have no political leanings at all, do you? I thought only brain-dead slugs refused to have opinions. Slugs, or cowards."

"Political opinions are a luxury I've never been able to afford," Mara countered evenly. She was on to his verbal combat techniques now, and she wasn't about to let herself be drawn out by the challenge in his tone. "Mostly, I've been busy staying alive. Where I stand depends on who's offering the best deal. Or who has the blaster in my back."

"The blaster currently in your back is mine," Markko reminded her, hefting the weapon for emphasis. "Does that mean you're working for me?"

Mara shrugged. "You have the blaster. I have Ghent. And I'm still waiting for those introductions."

For a long moment Markko studied her. "All right," he said. "My name is Markko. I'm an agent of the Rebel Alliance."

The Rebel Alliance. Even more or less prepared for it, the revelation still somehow came as a shock. "I see," Mara said, trying not to let the contempt show through. These were the people who had destroyed her life ... "And the computer system?" she asked. "Yours, I take it?"

"Another group's, yes," Markko said, nodding. "I was hired to inveigle my way into Egron's confidences so that I can be there when it's sliced. Once I've neutralized the most critical information, they're welcome to whatever's left."

"Generous of you." Mara gestured to the ring of other faces. "Where do they come in?"

"They're the local cell." Markko gave her an ironic smile. "Their job was to make sure you delivered Ghent as promised."

"Good," Mara said. "Consider their job finished."

She turned toward the door. "Where are you going?" one of the others demanded.

"I'll be at the southwest gate with Ghent in an hour and a half," she told Markko, ignoring the question. "Don't be late, and have the money ready."

She sent a look at the other Rebels over her shoulder. "And don't try to follow me," she added. "The next time I have to lose a tail, I'm likely to lose him a little more permanently."

Without waiting for a reply, she left the room.

No one tried to stop her. No one tried to follow her, either.

A minute later she was once again out in the cool night air, her head spinning with the possibilities. A captured Rebel computer. A complete Rebel cell.

And a high-level Rebel agent brought in just for the occasion. She could do it. She knew she could. They trusted her, or at least realized they didn't have any choice in the matter. She could bring Ghent to the palace, slice the computer, and then turn both the computer and Markko over to Governor Egron.

Maybe it would be enough to get her a job in the governor's local Intelligence Department. Probably not much of one, but at least enough to let her rejoin the fight against the Rebellion. It would be a chance to start building a life for herself again. Maybe even a chance to get Isard off her back.

Yes, this was going to work. And all because she'd decided to stay on Chibias long enough to hear a concert.

Maybe the Force hadn't entirely deserted her after all. Nevertheless, she took a long, circuitous route back to her hotel, watching the street behind her the whole way.

* * *

"Are you sure," Ghent muttered as they walked toward the muted lights of the palace's southwest gate, "that this is a good idea?"

"We'll be fine," Mara assured him, trying to sound like she meant it. The plan had sounded terrific on her way back to the hotel. It had sounded equally good as she explained it to Ghent, his hair sticking up even more wildly fresh out of the shower as he'd tried to roll up the cuffs of the spare jumpsuit he'd borrowed from her closet.

But now, actually walking up to the palace, it suddenly didn't seem quite so airtight anymore.

Especially as she had a strong suspicion that Markko's Rebel friends were moving in to fill the shadows behind them. If she couldn't convince Governor Egron that she and Ghent were on his side, a quick exit could be difficult.

The guards at the gate opened it without question or comment. Inside, they found Markko waiting for them, a half dozen stormtroopers in tow. He nodded silently at Ghent, then looked at Mara. "Follow me," was all he said.

They did so. The stormtroopers, Mara noted without surprise, fell into step behind them.

Markko led the way through a maze of dimly lit corridors, changing direction every couple of corners. It was probably not the most direct route to wherever they were going, but instead one carefully designed to confuse them as to where exactly they were, and -- more importantly -- which way was out.

Eventually, they reached a set of unmarked doors. Markko pushed them open, and the group stepped inside.

The room was much larger than the size of the doors would have suggested. It was built along the same lines as the reception room she'd spoken to Markko in earlier, with a high, domed ceiling supported by decorative arches rising up from the floor. This one seemed to be designed as an assembly or audience hall, with a raised platform near the far end and a throne-like chair resting atop it. Large paintings and ancient tapestries lined the carved stone walls, with sculptures set in niches or on small pedestals scattered around. It was a room clearly designed to impress visitors with Governor Egron's wealth, position, and culture.

And in the center of the room, laid out in front of the throne, was the captured computer system.

It was larger than Mara had expected from Markko's earlier description. Or perhaps that was just an illusion created by the racks and tables of examination and analysis equipment that had been arrayed in a wide ring around it, all of it connected to the computer with tangles of different colored cables. Markko and his buddies hadn't just been sitting around waiting for Ghent to show up and do their job for them. They'd tried their best to crack this particular damak nut before giving up.

Which meant she and Ghent really had them over the turret gun here. Chances were she could have doubled their fee, and Markko still would have agreed to it.

She looked at Ghent, wondering if he might be following that same line of thought. But no. He was looking at the computer the way an art connoisseur would look at one of the paintings or sculptures in the room. The thought of money probably hadn't even registered with him yet.

"There it is," a deep voice said from behind them.

Mara turned as an older man with a heavily lined face strode into the room past the group of stormtroopers now gathered beside the door. "This is Ghent, I take it?" the man added, studying the boy with obvious doubt.

"That's him," Mara said calmly. She'd never met this particular official, but his face had been among the files the Emperor had had her memorize years ago. "And you, I take it, are Governor Egron."

Egron looked at her as if eyeing a side dish he hadn't ordered. "Markko?" he asked.

"A friend of Ghent's," Markko explained. "She's handling the negotiations for his service."

Egron sent him a sharp look. "Negotiations?"

"It's all right," Markko said, soothing him with an upraised hand. "It's under control. Okay, Ghent, there's the computer. Get busy."

Wordlessly, his eyes still shining, Ghent crossed to the computer. For a minute or two he continued to gaze at it, his eyes tracing out some of the cable connections. Then, still without saying anything, he sat down in front of the main analysis console. Slowly at first, then picking up more and more speed, his fingers started caressing the keys.

"So you're his business manager, are you?" Egron's voice said in Mara's ear.

"Unofficially," Mara said, turning to face him. "It's a temporary job, but one I expect to be quite profitable."

Egron snorted. "Trying to shake down an Imperial Governor is a risky proposition."

"That's not actually what I had in mind," Mara said, glancing surreptitiously around. Markko was standing a respectful distance behind Ghent, watching him work, and none of the stormtroopers were within earshot. This was her chance to lay it all out for him. "Tell me, Governor --"

"Governor?" Markko called softly. "Would you come here, please?"

"Certainly." Egron nodded once at Mara, then brushed past her and crossed to Markko's side. Markko murmured something, and a moment later the two of them were in a deep conversation.

Mara turned away, a quiet alarm starting to sound in the back of her mind. Did Markko suspect her planned double-cross of him and his Rebel friends? If so, he would make it his business to keep her from ever being alone with Egron, at least until he could feed the governor a story designed to cut the ground out from under her.

Which he might very well be doing right now, in fact. And from what she remembered of Egron's file, the governor might well choose to believe his supposed friend rather than Mara's Imperial recognition codes.

She glanced back at the door. And all of it taking place in a room with no way out except through six stormtroopers.

Time to find an alternative exit.

She began to drift around the audience hall, pretending to study the artwork. Eggon's private office and living quarters would certainly include secret exits, but a public gathering room like this probably wouldn't. Her best hope would be a back door that had been covered by one of the tapestries and forgotten.

"Arica?" Markko called.

She turned around. Markko was still standing behind Ghent, gesturing Mara to join him; the governor had moved off and was prowling the edges of the computer equipment like a hungry wrix searching for a way into a bantha corral.

Mara walked over to Markko, keeping an eye on the stormtroopers as she did so. So far, there was no indication of special awareness on their part. "Yes?"

"The governor has agreed to your demand," Markko told her. "Two thousand an hour. I presume standard Imperial currency will be acceptable?"

"Perfectly," Mara said. "And now, let's discuss what you're going to pay us."

He frowned. "What are you talking about? I just said --"

"You said the governor is paying two thousand," Mara cut him off. "But you've got your own agenda here, right? Why should you get a free ride on his back?"

Markko exhaled noisily. "I don't believe this," he growled. "You have more simple, flat-out --" He strangled off the words. "Fine. Whatever you want" Spinning around in a neat about-face, he stalked away.

"Whatever you say," Mara murmured after him, making sure her satisfaction didn't show in her voice. How to cut short a conversation you didn't want to have, in one easy lesson: start talking about money.

Turning her back on the fuming Markko, Mara stepped to Ghent's side. "How's it going?" she asked.

No response. "Ghent?" she tried again.

This time, he looked up at her. "You say something?" he asked vaguely.

"I asked how it was going," she repeated. "You making any progress?"

"Some," he said. "It's kind of slow-going. I've never run into these encrypts before."

"I'm sure you'll get it," she said encouragingly.

"Oh, I know," he said distractedly, looking back down at the console.

"Let me know when you're getting close," Mara added quietly. "Just me. Understand?"

"Sure," he said. "Hey, you want to see something really cool? Watch this."

He punched a few keys and the lines of gibberish on one of his displays were replaced by a curving red-and-blue logo that twisted and turned like an air snake performing a ballet. Beneath the dance, a set of numbers and letters rocked back and forth as if they were spectators enjoying the show. "Isn't that neat?" Ghent said. "You ever seen anything like it?"

"Yes," Mara said between suddenly stiff lips. Yes, she had indeed seen that logo before. It was the emblem of the Shasstariss Whisperers Corporation, a small, family-run company contracted by the Empire to create certain specialized military encrypts. And from the code number listed below the logo ...

She looked at the computer, the skin on the back of her neck tingling. This was no captured Rebel computer, Sector Command level or otherwise.

It was the primary control node from an Imperial Star Destroyer.

And with that, the whole thing suddenly turned on its head. Markko wasn't looking to scorch some Rebel database before the information could be coaxed out. What he was going for here was nothing less than a full set of Star Destroyer control matrices, transmission patterns, and military encrypts.

She threw a look over at Markko out of the corner of her eye. No wonder he'd felt it necessary to try to squeeze Ghent as hard as he could to make sure the kid did the job. A coup like this for his Rebel friends would probably jump him two ranks on the spot. And right under an Imperial governor's nose, too.

An icy grip seemed to settle itself around her throat. Back at the Rebel house, she remembered belatedly, Markko had mentioned tapping into the palace computers to search out her Arica Pradeux alias. And he would have had no more than a few minutes to do the job between the time she left the palace and the time she found him at the Rebel meeting house.

And yet, by his own admission, he was only a pretty fair slicer. How could he possibly have gotten past the specialized encrypts into the personnel files that fast?

Answer: he hadn't, because someone else had done it for him. Someone who didn't need to slice the system, because that someone already had the necessary decrypts.

Or in other words, Governor Egron.

She looked at Egron, still pacing his restless circle around the room, the invisible hand around her throat squeezing a little harder. There was no reason for an Imperial governor to need or want military encrypts. There was certainly no reason for him to want any of the other information stored in a Star Destroyer computer.

Unless, of course, he intended to sell it.

She took a deep breath. So that was it. Markko wasn't simply leading an unsuspecting Egron around by the nose. The governor had seen which way the wind was blowing through the Empire, and had made a deal with the Rebellion to take early retirement.

In fact, in all probability it was Egron who had arranged the whole thing. Everything from contacting Markko to securing the computer to locating a fringe slicer who could turn it inside out without anyone noticing.

Perhaps that was the real reason they'd kept him living on the streets for a week, in fact. By not trying to contact anyone in his distress, he'd effectively proven there was no one he could call. Which meant that, once he'd served his purpose, he could quietly disappear without anyone noticing or caring.

And if Ghent was slated to disappear, anyone who knew about him was certainly in line for the same one-way ride. Even someone who knew Imperial recognition codes.

Especially someone who knew Imperial recognition codes.

"Isn't that great?" Ghent said again. "I really like the way it -- "

"Okay, that's enough," Mara said, dropping a warning hand onto his shoulder.

There must have been something in her voice or touch, because for a wonder he got the message.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Right now, everything is wrong," she told him grimly. "We're surrounded by enemies, Ghent. I need to find us a way out, and fast."

For a second she thought she'd made a mistake in saying anything. The kid's mouth dropped open, his eyes widening in shock, and Mara braced herself for the exclamation that would bring the whole crowd running to see what was going on.

But her instincts hadn't played her false. The mouth closed, the eyes shrank back to normal, and he gave her a microscopic nod. "Okay," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"What I need most is time," she said. "Can you stall this operation any?"

He shrugged. "Sure. It was probably going to take me another half hour or so anyway."

"Make it an hour," Mara said, glancing around for inspiration. Stormtroopers gathered around the door, Egron and Markko wandering around impatiently...

In a room with stone walls, arched support beams, and hanging artwork.

It would be risky, on at least two different levels. But at this point they didn't have a lot of options. "Is there any way you can get this equipment to make noise?" she asked. "Nothing too loud, but like a buzzing or warbling or something?"

"Uh ..." He looked around. "Yeah, I think so. You mean something really irritating?"

"Just something to cover up other reasonably soft noises," she told him. "Give me about five minutes, then get it started."

"Okay," he said. "Then what?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. When we go, we go together."

Giving his shoulder another squeeze, she stepped back and moved toward where Egron was doing his circles. He saw her coming and stopped. "Is he done?"

"No, but he's hungry," Mara told him. "I'd like to go get something for him to eat"

"He can eat when he's finished," Markko put in, coming in to join the conversation.

"Hungry slicers don't work nearly as well as happy, well-fed ones," Mara countered. "Or as quickly, either." She shrugged. "But, hey, you're the ones paying the bill. If you want this to take an extra couple of hours, that's fine with me. I haven't got anywhere else I have to be."

Markko and Egron looked at each other. Mara caught Markko's tiny nod-- "All right," the governor said. "But you're not leaving. I'll have something sent in."

Turning, he strode over to the stormtroopers. A few words, and two of the six about-faced and disappeared through the door. Markko had already drifted away. Mara did so now, too, moving back to the wall and her earlier study of the hanging artwork. Only four stormtroopers left to deal with, provided she was ready to make her move before the others returned.

And that was going to depend on Ghent. If the kid got so wrapped up in his work he forgot to bring up the background noise she'd requested ...

She was halfway around the room, studying a triangular canvas with lumpy paint and a vaguely Rodian look about it, when she first noticed the faint humming sound.

It started quietly, like an insect wandering around in the distance. But almost immediately the noise level began to increase. She looked around, pretending to be searching for its origin, and managed to be looking back at Ghent just as Markko and Egron reached him.

"What's that noise?" the governor demanded. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's okay," Ghent assured them. "It's a Periander feedback circle. Lots of security systems have them built in. Makes noise when someone tries to slice 'em."

"Can't you turn it off?" Markko asked, leaning over Ghent's shoulder as he studied the displays.

"Turn it off?" Ghent echoed, looking up at him in astonishment. "No, no. You want this to keep going."

"Why?" Markko growled.

"Because it's useful," Ghent said patiently. "The noise tells you how you're doing on the slice. See, if it raises or lowers in pitch --" He launched into a technical discussion, but Mara didn't need to hear any more. Turning away again, she slipped her lightsaber from its hidden pocket, concealing it under the edge of her jacket. Ghent had done his part. Time for her to do hers.

She stepped close to one of the paintings, lifting her left hand to touch her fingers to the edge of the frame as if holding it steady for examination. Shifting her body slightly so that it blocked the view from both the door and the computer equipment, she placed the tip of her lightsaber against the wall and ignited it.

The snap-hiss sounded about ten times louder than usual. She tensed, senses alert for any sign that anyone else had heard it.

But between Ghent's animated explanation and the increasingly annoying squeal from his equipment, the sound had apparently gone unnoticed. Keeping the handle flat against the wall so that none of the glowing blade would be visible, she eased the lightsaber upward, carefully slicing through the stone at an angle. The Paparak cross-cut was an esoteric bit of engineering technique, one of many the

Emperor had taught her over the years, designed to weaken a stressed wall in such a way that it would hold together long enough for the saboteur to safely get clear of the resultant collapse.

She finished her cut and closed down the lightsaber. The next cut, she calculated, should be near the base of the support column three meters to her right. Sliding the weapon back into concealment, she moved casually toward the next painting.

A Paparak cross-cut for this size room would normally take no more than five minutes to set up. With the need to look casual about her wanderings, though, it was closer to twenty minutes later before she was ready.

There was one final set of cuts to make. Just to the right of a particularly interesting painting at the back of the room, she stealthily carved out a triangular opening that, once the stone was kicked out, would serve as a quick exit.

And it was time to go.

She returned the lightsaber to its pouch and began moving back toward Ghent, still drifting along like a bored business manager marking time until she could count the money. Governor Egron was still prowling, but Markko seemed to have taken up a permanent position behind Ghent's shoulder.

That would have to be dealt with. Fortunately, she had a pretty fair idea how to do that.

Markko looked over as she stopped behind Ghent's other shoulder. "Been enjoying the governor's art collection?" he asked.

"It's not too shabby," Mara said, glancing over Ghent's displays.

"Tell me, Markko, how well do you actually know Governor Egron?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean is there any chance he knows who you really are."

For a long moment he was silent. Ghent, predictably, kept working, apparently completely oblivious to the conversation. "Why do you ask?" Markko said at last.

"One of the paintings over there," Mara said, nodding toward the one beside the bolthole she'd carved in the wall. "You ever hear of cantrosh gas?"

"What is this, military class?" Markko growled.

"No, survival class," Mara retorted. "You know what it is or not?" Markko hissed between his teeth. "It's a war gas. Spreads out quickly; highly poisonous to most species."

"Very good," Mara said. "Well, that particular painting has been set in a cantrosh-oxide-matrix frame. For extra credit, you want to tell me what happens if you hit an oxide matrix with, say, a blaster shot?"

Markko looked over at the governor. "He wouldn't."

"Why not?" Mara countered. "Not while he's in the room, obviously, unless he's got a breather mask on him or stashed away in that throne. And of course, the stormtroopers' filtration systems will protect them just fine. So back to the original question: any chance he knows who you really are?"

Markko was really quite good at keeping his emotions and thought processes from showing on his face. But again, enough leaked out to show Mara that she'd hit the mark. After all, an Imperial governor who could turn traitor to his own government would hardly lose sleep over doing the same thing to another ally. "You seem to be the expert with this stuff," he said at last. "What do you recommend?"

"I recommend getting it out of here, that's what," Mara said tartly. "We unhook the painting from the wall, march it across the room, and tell Egron it goes or we do."

'And you think he'll just do it?"

"With all that lovely data still locked away where he can't get it?" Mara reminded him. "What else can he do? Ghent? Come on, Ghent, look alive."

Ghent blinked his way back to the real world. "What?"

"We're going for a walk," Mara told him, pulling back his chair. "Come on, get up."

"Wait a second," Markko said as Mara half pulled Ghent to his feet. "He's going with us?"

"Call it an exercise break," Mara said. "Besides, Egron might go ahead and have the stormtroopers shoot if it was just you and me, counting on being quick enough to haul Ghent out before the gas drifts this far across the room."

"Gas?" Ghent echoed, his jaw dropping. "What gas?"

"It's okay," Mara said, taking his arm. "It's under control. Come with us."

They started across the room. "Where are you going?" Egron called, his circling coming to a sudden halt.

"It's called exercise," Mara called back. "If you want to be useful, why don't you go see what's taking that food?"

Egron muttered something under his breath and turned his back on them. "Wait a second," Markko muttered. "We don't want him leaving the room."

"He won't risk Ghent's life," Mara reminded him, not breaking pace. "Check out that throne and see if you can find a breather mask hidden somewhere."

If Markko had had time to think about it, Mara knew, he would never have let her and Ghent get away from him, even just a few paces. But he was clearly a man used to following orders, and without even a whisper of protest he veered off and headed toward the throne. Mara kept going, wishing she could look over her shoulder and see what Egron and the stormtroopers were doing, but knowing she didn't dare. Ten more paces ...five ...

And then they were at the wall. "Get ready," she murmured, half turning to stand sideways to her triangular cut. Throwing one glance back across the room to make sure no stormtrooper rifles were being brought to bear, she lifted her right leg and threw a side kick as hard as she could into the stone.

And with a horrible crunch, the triangle shattered into a pile of broken rubble.

"Go!" she ordered, shoving Ghent through the opening and turning fully now to face her opponents. Egron was standing flat-footed, his mouth hanging open with bewilderment; the stormtroopers were reflexively dropping into firing crouches and scrambling to bring their guns to bear --

And Markko had the ugly, vicious look of a man who's just realized he's been conned.

And as Mara ducked back through the hole behind Ghent, there was a snapped order, and the wall around her began to shatter and spark with blaster fire.

That was a mistake. With the structural integrity already weakened by Mara's calculated lightsaber damage, the blaster bolts were all it took to push it over the edge. Even as Mara grabbed Ghent's arm, the entire wall began to collapse.

"Run!" Mara snapped, hauling the kid along the service corridor they now found



themselves in. Chunks of stone were falling all around them, filling the corridor with debris and a choking rock dust, and from the sound of it she guessed that the rest of the chamber was falling in on itself as well. Hopefully crushing the Star Destroyer computer in the process; but there was nothing else she could do about that now.

They picked and coughed their way to the end of the corridor, only to discover it was a dead end. "Now what?" Ghent managed between coughs.

"Get ready to run," Mara told him, pulling out her lightsaber and igniting it. Two quick slashes and a kick, and they were through. The room on the far side was deserted, but through the dwindling sound of crunching masonry from behind them she could hear shouts and orders and an occasional distant scream.

They crossed the room to the door, and Mara looked cautiously out into an equally deserted hallway. "Quick and quiet," she murmured to Ghent as she closed down the lightsaber. If everyone else in the palace would just concentrate on the scene of the disaster and leave them alone ...

They got two more hallways before their luck ran out. And it ran out to the tune of a roving squad of four stormtroopers.

"Halt," the squad leader barked, swinging his blaster rifle toward them. "Identify yourselves."

Mara hesitated. Her lightsaber was nestled half-hidden against her side, the bottom end held in her cupped right hand. In the close confines of the hallway it would be quick work to cut down all four of them before they realized what was happening.

But these were Imperial soldiers, members of the order she had once so proudly been a part of. And even though they served a traitorous governor, they themselves had done nothing that deserved death. "Imperial agent on official business," she said instead.

"Recognition code Besh-Senth-Isk-Twelve."

The stormtroopers straightened noticeably. "Pattern Nen-Peth?" the leader asked.

"One-three-seven-seven," Mara said.

"Acknowledged," the leader said, lifting his rifle. "You may pass." Ghent was staring at the stormtroopers with a look of stunned disbelief. Mara nudged him, startling him back to life, and together they slipped past the squad. "Wow," he breathed as they turned another corner into yet another deserted hallway. "Where'd you learn all that stuff?"

He suddenly gave her an even more startled look. "Are you a Jedi?"

"Hardly," Mara assured him grimly. The only Jedi in the business these days was ... "Come on," she said, refusing to even think that name anymore today. "The door we came in by should be right up here."

At which point, it suddenly occurred to her, they would have to get past Markko's group of Rebels. But there was no point thinking too far ahead. The roving stormtroopers clearly hadn't heard that Mara and Ghent were wanted, but the outer gate guards might be on a different communications loop. If they were, and if they'd gotten the message, the official-business ploy wasn't going to work a second time.

Ahead she could see the exit door, with no one in sight. Either the guards were all outside or else they'd been summoned to the scene of the audience room collapse. Breathing a little easier, she headed toward it --

"Not so fast, traitor."

She froze in place. The voice had come from behind them ...and even twisted with fury, she had no difficulty recognizing it. Slowly, keeping her hands in sight, she turned around. "Hello, Governor," she greeted him. "You're looking well."

"You mean I'm looking alive?" he snarled. "Yes, I am. So sorry to have spoiled your plan."

"You didn't, really," Mara assured him, looking him over. His face was drawn and pale, his clothing as covered in dust as hers and Ghent's were, and there was blood oozing through the powder from a variety of small cuts and scrapes.

But the blaster he was pointing at them was steady as a rock. "By the way, where's your friend Markko?" Mara asked, just for something to say. "Too far from the door, was he?"

"Don't you wish," Markko said, stepping into view from a side corridor that intersected their hallway a few paces closer to the exit. He was in even worse shape than Egron, and the blaster in his hand had the uneven waver of a drunken snake trying hard to appear sober.

But what he lacked in steadiness, he was more than making up in determination. Heavily favoring his left leg, he was nevertheless limping steadily toward them, wincing with pain at each step.

"You misunderstand my goal," Mara told him, keeping her voice calm as she eased away from Ghent toward the hallway wall behind her. Two blasters on them; but Markko's unsteady hand was the distinctly lesser danger, at least until he got closer. "I had no particular wish to kill either of you," she added. "Or even damage you, for that matter."

She looked back at Egron. "All I wanted was the computer," she said, waving with her left hand in the direction of the collapsed room, using the distraction of the gesture to move another step back. Her lightsaber was still balanced half concealed in her right hand, her sleeve gun resting ready against her left forearm. "You don't need military encrypts, Governor. Nor have you any right to them."

"It's a moot point now, isn't it?" Egron shot back bitterly. "You saw to that. The whole ceiling came down -- huge pieces of rock falling all over the place computer's completely wrecked."

"Good," Mara said. "I hope at least the stormtroopers --"

And right in the middle of the sentence, she swung her lightsaber up and around, igniting it in the same motion, and hurled it straight at the governor.

Egron screeched, his reflexive shot going wide as he ducked away in panic from the flying lightsaber. Mara dropped into a crouch, yanking out her sleeve blaster as Ghent gave a yelp of his own. Egron fired again, this shot going even wider than the first.

Mara's shot was right on target.

"Freeze!" Markko's ragged voice said.

Carefully, Mara turned her head, her gun still pointed at Egron's motionless body, her mind black with chagrin. Ghent's yelp a second earlier hadn't been from surprise, as she'd assumed, but from the shock of having Markko's arm suddenly around his throat.

The arm was still there, pinning him upright against Markko's body.

And Markko's blaster was pressed very steadily to the side of his head.

"You see?"

Markko ground out. "I can be clever, too. Drop the gun."

"I'm impressed," Mara said, making no move to comply. "The limp, the wavering gun -- very nicely done."

"Thank you," Markko said. "I assumed that when faced with a choice of targets, you'd go first for the more threatening one."

"Absolutely," Mara said, starting to feel rather weird about the direction this conversation was taking. It was like they were two professionals talking shop.

Maybe they were. "I see you've been trained too," she said. "Maybe almost as well as I've been."

"Possibly better," he suggested.

"Possibly," Mara said. "But you've made one mistake."

"Oh? What's that?"

Mara nodded slightly toward his gun. "You're targeting the wrong person."

"No, I don't think so," Markko said. "You seem to care about this kid. I don't think you'd like to watch him die."

Ghent made a gurgling sound in the back of his throat. His eyes were bulging, pleading wordlessly with her.

But Ghent didn't know how to think these things through. Mara did. She hoped. "Not particularly, no," she conceded. "But no more than I'd dislike watching any other innocent bystander get killed for no useful reason. Fact is, Markko, I hadn't even met Ghent before tonight. We're hardly long-lost friends or anything."

Markko studied her for a moment. "In that case," he said at last, "we may be in something of an impasse."

"I'm afraid so," Mara agreed. "If you shoot Ghent, you lose your shield. More to the point, you'll never get your blaster around to target me before I can take you down. Take my word for it."

"I believe you," Markko said tightly. "And if I just target you right now...?"

"Same thing happens," Mara told him. "You should have shot me at once instead of trying to take a hostage."

"Yes," Markko murmured. "I agree: definitely a mistake. But I wanted to find out who and what you were."

"That's easy enough," Mara said. "I am justice." She nodded her head toward Egron's body. "He tried to betray the Empire. I pronounced him guilty, and executed him."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," Mara confirmed.

Markko's lips puckered. "I see I really am in trouble."

Mara looked at Ghent's terrified face. A Rebel operative, an enemy of the Empire and everything she believed in ...and a scared civilian. A kid, caught up in trouble not of his own making.

Where did her duties lie here?

Once, she'd known the answer to that question. Now, all the lines had gone fuzzy.

But Ghent had come here trusting her. Trusting her.

And with the Emperor dead, and the Empire currently in the hands of people like Isard, maybe that was all that mattered.

"Not necessarily," she told Markko. "I've discharged my duty by executing a traitor. I have no particular quarrel with you."

Markko snorted. "Of course not. A Rebel agent and someone who defines herself as Imperial Justice has no quarrel with me?"

"Let me put it this way," Mara said. "I'll offer you a deal. You let Ghent go and put your blaster away, and all three of us walk away from here, alive and free. You insist on playing Rebel hero ... and I'm the only one who walks."

Markko's eyes flicked to Egron, back to Mara. "Why should I trust you?"

Mara shrugged. "Why not? I've got what I wanted: a dead traitor, and military encrypts safely out of Rebel hands. I can afford to be generous."

She lifted her eyebrows. "And as I said, I don't particularly like seeing innocent bystanders get killed. Especially when they're just kids."

For a long moment Markko just stared at her. Mara held her position, heart thudding in her throat, watching his eyes for the shaved second of warning that would be all she would get if he decided his pride was worth more than his life.

And then, slowly, he lifted his blaster away from Ghent's head, his other arm relaxing its pressure on the boy's neck. Ghent gave another gurgle and dropped like a thin sack onto his knees on the floor. For another long second Markko just stood there, his gun pointed at the ceiling, his eyes on Mara's, wordlessly inviting her to renege on her promise.

But Mara made no move; and taking a deep breath, Markko turned the blaster around and slid it back into his coat. "Until next time," he said, giving her a slight bow. Turning his back on them, he strode to the side corridor he'd appeared from and disappeared down it.

Mara gave the sound of his retreating footsteps a few more seconds, then straightened up. Blaster still in hand, she stepped past Egron's body and retrieved her lightsaber. "Come on, Ghent," she said, closing it down and slipping it back into its pouch. "Door's right there. Let's go"

* * *

They were three blocks from the palace, and the sounds of emergency vehicle sirens were fading behind them, before Ghent finally spoke. "Would you really have let him kill me?" he asked.

"If he'd really wanted to kill you, there wasn't anything I could have done to stop him," Mara told him. "I'm sorry, but that's just the way it was. All I could do was try to persuade him that you didn't mean anything to me, so that he couldn't use you as a lever."

"But you are an Imperial agent?"

Mara swallowed. "I was once," she admitted. "At the moment... let's just say I don't really have a home right now."

Ghent seemed to digest that. "So what do we do now?"

"We get out of here," Mara said. "Too many people saw us in there. Once they get the pieces sorted out, they'll be looking for both of us. What will it take to get you home?"

"I don't know," Ghent said. "Enough money for a ticket, I guess. Do we have time to go back to your hotel for my backpack?"

"That might not be a good idea," Mara said, shaking her head. "I didn't think Markko's people had trailed me back there earlier. But now I know Markko's smarter than I thought."

She frowned back over her shoulder. Come to think of it, what had happened to the group of Rebels who she thought had been forming up outside the palace as she and Ghent went in? There'd been no sign of them on the way out; certainly there had been no hindrance to their escape. Had they all scattered for the woods when the alarm went off?

Or had they merely reconvened outside Mara's hotel in hopes of belated revenge? "No, it's definitely not a good idea," she concluded. "Sorry."

"That's okay," Ghent said with a sigh. "I kind of figured that, actually."

"For whatever it's worth, I'm leaving most of what I own back there, too," Mara said, sifting through her pockets. "Any idea what a ticket back to Sibisime would cost?"

"Uh ... no, not really," he said. "Probably eight hundred. Maybe nine."

Mara grimaced. Nearly all she had, in other words. Back to square zero, it seemed. "Here," she said, offering him the credits. "I hope this will be enough."

"But I can't take your money," he protested.

"Take it," Mara ordered, in no mood to be argued with. "I can work for my passage off this rock. Just go home, all right?"

Reluctantly, he took the credits. "But how do I pay you back?"

"Don't worry about it," she told him, glancing back behind them again. Still no sign of pursuit. "Maybe we'll run into each other again some day. In the meantime--" She pointed straight ahead. "The spaceport's that way. Think you can find it by yourself?"

"Sure," he said. "What about you?"

She pointed to the right. "Recruiting for transport hands is handled at the guild office down that street. Watch yourself, all right?"

"Sure," he said. "You too."

For a second he looked like he was going to try to hug her. But Mara simply turned and walked away. He would be all right, she knew. He would be all right, she hoped.

* * *

The boy got another two blocks toward the spaceport, with the mysterious woman long out of sight, before Talon Karrde decided it was safe to approach. "Excuse me," he said, stepping out of the shadows where he'd been waiting. "Are you Ghent?"

The boy froze. "Yes?" he said nervously. "Who are you?"

"My name is Talon Karrde," Karrde introduced himself. "Don't worry, I'm not out to get you. I'm here to offer you a job."

Ghent snorted. "I've had enough of job offers for awhile, thanks." He frowned suddenly. "Are you the one who sent me the ticket?"

"No," Karrde assured him. "Though I admit your sudden disappearance did throw me off track for a few days. I'd been preparing to approach you back on Sibisime when you suddenly left."

"Okay," Ghent said, looking merely puzzled now. "So what do you want?"

"As I said, to offer you a job," Karrde said. "I have an organization of some modest size that engages in moving cargo and information from one place to another."

"Smugglers?"

Karrde shrugged. "More or less. We find ourselves in need of a good slicer; and our sources indicate that you're one of the best."

He gestured in the direction of the spaceport. "If you'd care to discuss it, my ship's berthed nearby. No obligation, of course."

"Well .." Ghent glanced over his shoulder. "I don't know. There are some people looking for me. Imperials and some other group. She said they might still be looking for me."

"The second group were members of the Rebel Alliance," Karrde told him. "And yes, both parties seem to have initiated retrieval efforts in your wake."

Ghent looked over his shoulder again. "You mean they're still back there?"

"Not anymore," Karrde assured him with grim amusement. "My people have dealt with both groups."

Ghent blinked at him. "So it would be safe to go back to the hotel and get my stuff? She said we'd have to leave everything."

"We can go anywhere you like," Karrde assured him. "Shall I get us a landspeeder?"

"No, it's not far," Ghent said. "We can walk. It's this way."

"Speaking of the woman," Karrde said as they set off.

"She was too far away for me to get a good look at her. Who was she, anyway?"

"I don't know," Ghent said. "She never told me her name. All she said was that she once worked for the Empire, but not anymore."

"Interesting," Karrde said thoughtfully. "And you say she left some things back in your room?"

"Yeah, but I don't think we can get them to her," Ghent said. "She said she'd be getting work on some ship. I don't know which one."

"Pity," Karrde murmured. "Still, you never know. We might run into her again someday."

"That's what she said," Ghent told him. "And you know, she had a lightsaber. You think she could be a Jedi or something?"

"You never know," Karrde said again.

And even if their paths never did cross again, he didn't add, there might be something among her abandoned belongings that would give him a clue as to her identity.

That could be useful someday. One never knew.

Signaling his silent ring of guards to move in close, Karrde and Ghent headed off into the night.